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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000531

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PHUM](#) [SMIG](#) [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: LABOR MINISTER DISCUSSES TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS,  
SAUDI WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Classified By: Ambassador James C. Oberwetter for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On August 7, Labor Minister Dr. Ghazi al-Qusaibi described the SAG's efforts against Trafficking in Persons (TIP) to the Ambassador. Minister al-Qusaibi agreed that this was a serious issue for the SAG, and he outlined the steps that it is taking, adding that Saudi Arabia must move "its own way at its own pace." He stressed the importance of increasing the number of Saudi citizens employed in the Kingdom, and he also raised his concerns with the number of people who overstay their pilgrimage visas to Saudi Arabia. The Minister outlined the following legal steps underway:

- a) new regulations for sponsoring work visas;
- b) shorter work-days for household employees;
- c) registering grievances and abuse cases with the Ministry of Interior;
- d) creating a standardized system to hire foreign workers;
- e) creating a Department of Expatriate Labor;
- f) promoting the employment of Saudi women in the workforce;
- g) developing public information campaigns; and
- h) challenging the religious authorities.

On Saudization, he stressed the policy priority of increasing the number of Saudis in the workforce. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During their August 7 meeting, Minister al-Qusaibi said he was surprised that Saudi Arabia was listed as a Tier 3 country in this year's TIP Report. In his meeting with Amb Miller in January, Minister al-Qusaibi said that Miller had expressed his satisfaction with the SAG.

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PUBLICIZING TIP CASES  
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¶3. (C) Ambassador Oberwetter reminded Minister al-Qusaibi that during their last meeting the Minister had agreed to publish more information on TIP cases. The Minister responded that the SAG "has nothing to hide" and that the Labor Ministry publishes monthly figures on the number of TIP cases. The Minister agreed that publishing and translating detailed TIP-related information on a monthly basis would help inform the international community on the facts of this important issue. He added that the media often demands information to be released, but he has found that once such information is publicly available, people are less interested in it.

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LEGAL MECHANISMS

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14. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi said that legal mechanisms are in place to enable workers to raise allegations of mistreatment with the Ministry. He said that one-third of all cases are settled out of court, and that most cases are not complicated to resolve. Al-Qusaibi opined that the U.S., as a litigious society, places more emphasis on sending cases to trial, whereas in Saudi Arabia the system encourages victims to settle out of court. He added that many victims and defendants insist that their cases be heard at higher levels, including Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court, which is unfeasible. The Minister said that each month between 100 and 150 million riyals (27-40 million USD) are paid to settle out of court in cases involving citizens from 40-50 countries.

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NEW REGULATIONS ON HIRING HOUSEHOLD HELP  
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15. (C) Ambassador Oberwetter explained to Minister al-Qusaibi that TIP is taken very seriously in the U.S., especially when Americans believe that the victims--not the perpetrators--are being punished. Minister al-Qusaibi responded that the treatment of maids and other household employees is often a problem in Saudi Arabia, as a number of Saudi citizens "lack the human decency, intelligence, and education" to treat their workers with dignity. He described the problem as "like a plague" and said that some Saudis "assume that someone coming from East Asia can work for 24 hours straight."

16. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi outlined the following new Labor

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Ministry regulations for allowing Saudi citizens to sponsor visas for household employees:

- Single men are not authorized to sponsor visas for any household workers.
- Married women are allowed to have one driver. (Comment: The Minister did not specify if married women are eligible to sponsor the visas, but currently only Saudi men are allowed to do so. End Comment.)
- The minimum monthly income for sponsoring the visa for one household employee is 5,000 riyals (1,333 USD).
- To sponsor two employees the minimum monthly income is 8,000 riyals (2,133 USD).
- To sponsor three employees the minimum monthly income is 10,000 riyals (2,666 USD).
- To sponsor four or more employees the minimum monthly income is 15,000 riyals (4,000 USD).

17. (C) The Minister admitted that several groups of workers have been excluded from the SAG's labor laws, including domestic employees, shepherds, and people that work on boats. He explained that in the case of domestic workers, the religious establishment believed that the Ministry would "invade private homes" to enforce the workers' rights. He said that such a view is "nonsense" and he said that he is working with the Majlis al-Shoura (Consultative Council) to help protect all workers.

18. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi said that he has submitted a new set of legally binding guidelines to the Council of Ministers for approval. The new regulations would grant household employees one day of rest per week and a maximum 12-hour workday, down from the current maximum of 16 hours. He admitted, however, that Cabinet approval of the new regulations--which are unpopular with employers--will be difficult as "many wives and mothers are praying against me." He added that he is not concerned "what the public or what Congress thinks about all of this--I am doing it because it is right. It is the honest and decent thing to do."

19. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi discussed the prevalence of a

"ring" that illegally hires maids by the hour in violation of their official work contracts. He said that maids are given the phone numbers of ring members, who convince the maids to abandon their original employers for the prospect of making more money working by the hour. The Minister said that the market for hiring maids by the hour and without sponsoring their visa "is very big." He said that the Labor Ministry is often blamed for not granting enough work visas, even though it issues 250,000 per year.

¶10. (C) The Minister said that 380 different agencies exist in the Kingdom to help Saudis hire foreign workers--a situation he described as "chaotic." He said that the Council of Ministers has decided to create three large companies to standardize the vetting, hiring, and wages of household employees.

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NEW DEPARTMENT OF EXPATRIATE LABOR  
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¶11. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi told the Ambassador that he is creating a new Department of Expatriate Labor, which should be fully functioning by this October. He said that the Department will be housed in one building with a 24-hour telephone hotline for foreign workers to register their grievances. He said that as Health Minister he had implemented a similar hotline, which was very successful.

¶12. (C) The Labor Ministry also has an arrangement with the Interior Ministry to register and computerize all TIP-related grievances. Minister al-Qusaibi said that working with the Interior Ministry helps solve tens of cases daily. He said that the system registers both individuals and companies who mistreat employees. He said that in cases of physical abuse, individuals are banned from sponsoring work visas for at least five years.

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WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE  
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¶13. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi said that the Ministry's "next big labor battle" is to increase the number of jobs for Saudi

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women. He said that the religious establishment is very opposed to such efforts, and that the Labor Ministry must take small steps. He said that the two Saudi human rights groups are supportive of his efforts, particularly in helping to challenge the Committee for the Prohibition of Vice and Promotion of Virtue ("mutawaa") for recently ordering the firing of 40 women who had been working in cosmetics shops. He described as "very positive" the ability of writers to now directly challenge religious authorities in an open debate. While progress is being made, he cautioned "it's a battle that Saudi Arabia needs to do its own way at its own pace. If we do it your way, it won't work."

¶14. (C) Turning to the Ministry's highly publicized efforts to employ only Saudi women in lingerie shops, Minister al-Qusaibi admitted that he made a mistake in setting a one-year deadline for compliance, "as that triggered an alliance between businessmen and the mutawaa." He said that he was originally shocked that the religious establishment would oppose the Ministry's efforts to only employ women in shops that primarily serve women. He explained that the real opposition was driven by businessmen, as the labor costs of Saudi women selling lingerie would be up to four times as high as employing foreign workers. Part of the higher costs includes allowances for the women's drivers, he said. Consequently, store owners used the religious rationale to mobilize the mutawaa to oppose the plan. Minister al-Qusaibi said that King Abdullah supports his efforts, and agreed that the plan should proceed incrementally with no deadline. He said that the plan is going smoothly and three or four

lingerie shops now employ women only.

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PUBLIC AWARENESS EFFORTS  
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¶15. (C) Minister al-Qusaibi said that the Labor Ministry has developed public awareness campaigns focused on:

- 1) increasing the level of employment of Saudi citizens (Saudization);
- 2) the rights of expatriate employees, including promoting the new regulations proposed to the Council of Ministers; and
- 3) cracking down on the illegal employment of maids and other household workers.

The Minister emphasized that "the real solution" is to increase the number of Saudi citizens employed in the Kingdom. The level of expatriate workers "is not sustainable," he said. "We can't expect Saudis to work when foreign labor is so cheap," he concluded.

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OVERSTAYERS  
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¶16. (C) A final problem that Minister al-Qusaibi said he confronts is the number of Muslim visitors who overstay their pilgrimage visas, and then find jobs in the informal economy without sponsorship. He said that approximately 1,000 overstayers are returned each day to Yemen alone, emphasizing that he has no idea how many others are not being caught for overstaying their visas. Noting the SAG's development projects in Yemen, he said that the best solution is to give a reason for Yemenis to want to return home after their pilgrimage. "We cannot turn Mecca and Medina into a military camp. The situation is like a ticking bomb," he concluded.  
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